DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 467 345 CG 031 894

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| AUTHOR | Mitchell, G.; Udow, G.; Downs, L. L.; McMaster, S.; DeWitt, K.; Parres-Sampson, L.; Stevenson, M. |
| TITLE | Do Inland Southern California Schools Meet American School Counselor Association National Standards: A Qualitative Study. |
| PUB DATE | 2002-08-23 |
| NOTE | 17p. |
| PUB TYPE | Reports - Research (143) |
| EDRS PRICE | EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | *Comprehensive Guidance; *Counselor Role; Elementary Secondary Education; *National Standards; *Responsibility; *School Counseling; School Counselors |
| IDENTIFIERS | *American School Counselor Association; California (South) |

ABSTRACT

In 1997 the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) published National Standards to identify the responsibilities of school counselors. Although there appears to be some improvement of counseling services nationwide, much work is still needed to match these standards and develop comprehensive counseling systems. A preliminary qualitative research study was undertaken to study the state of National Standards in K-12 school counseling programs of the inland region of Southern California. (Contains 16 references.) (Author)

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Running head: DO SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA SCHOOLS MEET NATIONAL STANDARDS

# Do Inland Southern California Schools Meet American School Counselor Association National Standards: A Qualitative Study

Mitchell, G., Udow, G., Downs, L. L., McMaster, S.,

DeWitt, K., Parres-Sampson, L., & Stevenson, M.

August 23, 2002

CG031894

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*Abstract*

In 1997 the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) published National Standards to identity the responsibilities of school counselors. Although there appears to be some improvement of counseling services nationwide, much work is still needed to match these standards and develop comprehensive counseling systems. A preliminary qualitative research study was undertaken to study the state of National Standards in K-12 school counseling programs of the inland region of Southern California.

Key words:

Comprehensive School Counseling

National Standards

Results Based Counseling

# Do Inland Southern California Schools Meet American School Counselor Association National Standards: A Qualitative Study

The school counselor's recommended role according to the American School Counselor Association (1997) is stated as:

> Within a comprehensive school counseling program professional school counselors will focus their skills, time and energy on direct service to students, staff and families. ASCA recommends a realistic student-counselor ratio of 1:250. Professional school counselors will spend 70 percent of their time in direct service to students. Indirect services include counseling program planning, maintenance and evaluation; participation in school site planning and implementation; partnerships and alliances with post secondary institutions, businesses and community agencies, and other tasks enhancing the program's mission (p. 1).

After extensive research and review (Dahir, 2000), the American School Counselors Association (Campbell & Dahir, 1997) announced the establishment of the National Standards for School Counseling Programs. The three domains of student development defined by the Standards are academic, career, and personal/social development. "Academic development includes the acquiring skills, attitude and knowledge contributing to effective learning in school across the life span" (p. 18). "The program standards for career development ... provide the foundation for the acquisition of skills, attitude and knowledge that enable students to make a successful transition from school to the world of work" (p. 19). "Personal/social development includes the acquisition of skills, attitude and knowledge which help students understand and respect self and others, acquire effective interpersonal skills, understand and practice safety and survival skills and develop into contributing members of society" (p. 19).

The National Standards recommend creation, implementation and evaluation of a comprehensive developmental school-counseling program. Such a counseling program would focus on what students, from pre-kindergarten through grade 12, should know and understand developmentally, academically, and personally. The principal attributes of a K-12 comprehensive developmental guidance and counseling program are sharply different from those of a established service delivery approach (Sink & Yillik-Downer, 2001). Counseling duties delineated for comprehensive guidance programs are individual and small group counseling, large group guidance presentations, consultation, case management, and coordination, management and evaluation of the school counseling program (ASCA, 1997, p. 2). Myrick (1997) asserts that the primary goals of this system are to help students learn more effectively and efficiently as well as to help make school life more rewarding.

The literature on comprehensive guidance programs indicates that many school guidance programs still cling to traditional ideas of counseling role. Counselors continue to function in a remedial and reactive mode, operating outside the educational mainstream or providing subordinate support services (Hogan, 1998).

However, the work of establishing comprehensive guidance programs nationwide has advanced significantly over the last two decades. A number of states and school districts over the past fifteen years have adopted some type of systematic approach to school counseling (Sink & McDonald, 1998). Currently it is estimated that more than half of the states promote the use of comprehensive guidance and counseling programs (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001).

Students in schools that had developed comprehensive guidance programs were more likely to report that they had earned higher grades, their education was better for preparing them for their future, their school made more career and college information available, and their school had a more positive climate. Students reported greater feelings of belonging and safety in their schools, indicated that their classes were less likely to be interrupted by other students, and that their peers behaved better in school. (Lapan & Gysbers, 1997).

A replication of the study of implementation of comprehensive guidance programs in Missouri (Gysbers, Lapan, Blair, Starr, & Wilmes, 1999) by students at The University of San Diego discovered a discrepancy between the National Standards and existing guidance programs in San Diego County schools. They reported that their interviews revealed that goals for counselors were set without accountability, counselors were not performing duties in accordance with the Standards, and there was a lack of program management (Shirley, Prise, Lee, Mulligan & Langer, 1999).

The investigation by Gysbers and associates (1999) and by Shirley et al. (1999) were replicated in this study to discover the extent to which the ASCA National Standards are being implemented in three counties in inland Southern California. The goals were to determine the state of school counseling programs across a three county region of Southern California in relation to student to counselor ratios, and the effects of the domains suggested by the ASCA National Standards.

## Method

The Gysbers et al. (1999) interview protocol was used for this exploratory study. It was intended to evaluate the administrator and counselor perceptions of success in

implementing comprehensive counseling in school guidance programs to meet National Standards.

Eighteen graduate students from California State University, San Bernardino, enrolled in the course, Professional School Counselor, conducted 66 interviews. All students had completed a course in research, including action research and qualitative method. Although the interview protocol was originally designed as an in-depth, structured interview, it was decided during review of qualitative interview methodology to use a flexibly structured interview design to adapt to the potential variance of interviewee knowledge of comprehensive school counseling systems. The questionnaire was reviewed in detail and consultation was provided by the instructor for students throughout the study.

Interview subjects included 29 principals, four vice principals, 25 pupil personnel services certified counselors, one school psychologist, one teacher assigned to counseling without credential, one school social worker, four contracted counselors with Marriage and Family Therapist licenses and 1 career technician. The persons interviewed were educators whom the graduate students were able to access and obtain agreements for participation. They were staff members at 21 elementary, 21 middle, and 28 high schools in Riverside, San Bernardino and eastern Orange counties.

Individual interviews were transcribed. A research team of six graduate students and a professor in the Educational Counseling and Guidance program compiled the data and performed a content analysis searching for predominant themes. All data were triangulated among at least three research team members. During data analysis, four

interviews were determined to be invalid because interviewees were either uncredentialed, did not sign the consent form or did not finish the interview.

## Results

The mean counselor to student ratios for respondent schools in the three counties researched in this study were Orange County, 1:1,660; Riverside County, 1:991; and San Bernardino County, 1:890. Qualitative analysis of transcripts of interviews held with school administrators and counselors identified four distinct themes. These themes included (a) nature of problems presented to counselors on the job, (b) intervention modes, (c) evaluation of counselor effectiveness, and (d) counselor and administrative attitudes toward the ASCA National Standards. The themes recurred to varying degrees across the academic, career, and personal/social domains of the National Standards. Those themes are represented in this report either by descriptive summary of trends or by quotations, each of which were determined to represent the perspectives of several interviewees.

### *Academic*

Respondents reported that there are institutional and community pressures for academic development at the expense of other potential areas of counseling activity. Student problems assigned to counselors included attendance, retention, and credit deficiencies. One administrator stated, "In this district the big push has been for counselors to monitor attendance, and counseling comes second." A high school principal stated, "[The counselors] are driven really by what's going on in the community, sometimes. I hate to say that, but there's always external influence. There's also

expectations. This community has different expectations. Their expectations are that these kids excel academically."

Two types of intervention modes appeared in the responses, proactive or preplanned and reactive. Proactive interventions occurred sporadically and included course scheduling at the middle school level and four-year planning at the high school level. Occasionally schools reported activities geared toward Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) whenever a grant had been secured. Reactive interventions included tutoring, attendance monitoring, and rescheduling of conflicting courses.

Measurement activities were strictly to measure student outcomes. These outcomes were not used to evaluate counselor effectiveness. Academic assessments included SAT9, district level testing which varied by district, and student grades. Respondents stated that they were involved in reports for Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) and Expected School-wide Learning Results (ESLRs).

*Career Guidance*

Interviewee responses revealed that career guidance was, for the most part, a separate entity divorced from the counseling program. There were, however, reports of activities including surveys, speakers from specific professions, and a career day. The one recently implemented activity reported by respondents was a guidance center where students were invited to participate in career exploration without available counseling or other support staff. At those sites, computer career search software was available. One respondent stated, "We have a career and guidance center which students are encouraged to use whenever they like." Even this element did not attain the competency expectation

of the ASCA National Standards. Instead, the guidance center was available to all students who chose to avail themselves, without counseling staff present. This falls short of the equity-based National Standards in which all students are expected to attain specified competencies.

No other counselor activities were identified in these career guidance data. In fact, there appeared to be a dearth of career guidance activities in respondent schools and one study participant reported, "The district has taken away all classes that taught students skills toward careers."

*Personal/Social*

Student problems reported by respondents that required counseling intervention included anger, lack of social skills, divorce, death, drug and alcohol abuse, child abuse and depression. Study participants reported knowledge of many proactive personal/social curricula. The most prevalent curricula identified by counselors included guidance lessons, drug and alcohol prevention, small group, and parenting classes. Although, due to time constraints, the predominant activities of counselors were not these identified curricula but reactive response to crisis, or walk-in counseling.

Beyond the reactive personal /social activities, counselors reported tracking discipline referrals, preparing case notes and case management reports, and cumulative files. Some respondents reported attempting to approximate ASCA National Standards by administering pre-tests of baseline behaviors and personal characteristics but neglected post-tests, so accountability for counselor effectiveness again did not exist.

Findings indicated respondents were dissatisfied with the level of personal/social counseling provided. One school counselor stated, "As far as [addressing] social

emotional, I think that is lacking." A school principal reported, "[The counselor] meets with the students when they are having a crisis." A counselor said, "A frequent part of my time is spent with crisis issues." Still another counselor reported, "Personal counseling will never get the attention it really needs in this [crisis] kind of system."

*General Descriptions of the State of Counseling in the Region*

The interviews provided convincing evidence of a discrepancy between the ASCA National Standards and the actual services provided in existing counseling and guidance programs. Two principals stated, "We have a bastardized model," and, "We have a haphazard model at best." One counselor stated, "We have no specific guidance counseling or guidance standards."

*Reactions to ASCA National Standards*

Three distinct types of responses were in the transcripts of interviews. These included appreciation of some of the potential results if Standards were to be implemented, praise for the ideals set by the Standards, and discouragement when comparing existing programs with the Standards.

Study participants stated that they believed implementation of the Standards would provide (a) credibility to the school counseling profession, (b) increased funding for counseling, (c) reduction of student to counselor ratios, (d) a corrected definition of the job description, and (e) increased accountability for results. Respondents also praised the National Standards and stated, "They provide a way for people to see what counselors really do;" and "[The Standards] give a proactive approach to counseling, not merely a knee-jerk response."

Conversely, one high school principal stated,

"I think they're elitist in some areas and that's just being honest. I think that if you had... the federal government even the state government come out with things they would like to see or aspirations; unfortunately they very seldom put the resources with it. If it were up to me, we would not only have a counselor for each grade level on a campus, we would have crisis counselors on each campus. We would have a lead counselor. We would have enough guidance techs, where the counselor would be freed up enough to do what we call real counseling. But, again, if you look at schools across the State of California and even across the nation, you will see that there are many schools that do not have counselors, and that is very unfortunate. So, if you are going to have standards you better make sure you have the resources, basically, that positively impact a school."

Statements which expressed counselor discouragement with existing programs included:

1. "I feel that the National Standards...sound good, but actually incorporating them presents a problem in high school with 3000 students to seven counselors,"
2. "They are good school Standards, but hard to implement in this setting of 3000 students to one counselor,"
3. "Our job is so different than the job we are trained to do. We do a lot of clerical things. We do a lot of administrative things, that have little to do with the general theories behind the National Standards."

## Discussion

Implications of this study are seen in each domain of the National Standards. In developing the Standards, ASCA stated the purpose of school counseling programs is to impart specific skills and learning opportunities through academics, career, and personal/social developmental experiences in a proactive and preventative manner (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). Counselors in the present study reported that, although they are aware of the Standards, they are more reactive in practice. They found little time for proactive guidance activities. Participant responses revealed no comprehensive counseling programs and serious inconsistencies in meeting student needs.

The findings give support to the rationale for the implementation of the National Standards for school counseling programs. Lapan and Gysbers (2001) suggest that fully implemented comprehensive guidance programs enhance student success. Schools becomes safer, scores and grades increase, behavior and attendance improves. Students are better prepared for their future, whether they choose college or school to work. Concentrating on academic schedules and attendance rather than comprehensive counseling leaves vital student needs unmet. In the worst case scenario, the lack of counselor attention to personal/social factors can contribute to the likelihood of violence on school campuses (Arman, 2000; Glasser, 2000).

Although most of the respondent counselors were aware of the ASCA National Standards, many were not well informed, and administrators tended to be unaware of the existence of National Standards. Further education about ASCA Standards could bring about a consistent definition of school counselor duties, not only for school counselors but also for university counselor educators, school districts, and administrators. Without

universal agreement regarding the role of school counselors, there is little likelihood of increased effectiveness of K-12 counseling or enhanced credibility of school counselors.

The failure of the sampled school guidance and counseling programs to meet the ASCA National Standards raises a related issue with regard to counselor ethics. According to the American Counseling Association's guide to ethical conduct, a counselor's conduct should be to actively promote growth and welfare of those they serve (Herlihy & Corey, 1996). Study participants did not address the career domain in a proactive way. Career Centers were often separate from the counseling program, with only technical support from computer technical staff or with no staff in attendance at all. Counselors did not assist students with career goal planning because of the separation of this duty from the counseling office.

## Conclusion

There were notable limitations of this study. First, not all schools in the three county, inland region of Southern California were included. Therefore, no generalizations may be made beyond the participating schools. Second, interview questions were dependent on each interviewee's interpretation, and responses were dependent on respondents' knowledge of their schools' counseling programs. However, the size of the sample and the collection of data via personal interviews enhanced the validity of the study for suggesting the present state of school counseling in the region.

This study supports the results of the Shirley et al. (1999) study of San Diego schools and suggests that many in Southern California are not meeting ASCA National Standards for counseling and guidance programs. Counselors confronted with mitigating their situation appear to be caught on the horns of a dilemma. California has the highest

student-to-counselor ratios in the nation (California Department of Education, 2001) and K-12 education has entered an age of accountability (Herr, 2001). Still, without both system support for counseling programs and effective, proactive, measured interventions by school counselors, improved response to National Standards is doubtful.

Two studies have now shown dramatic deficiencies in counseling programs across sample schools in a significant region of Southern California. Additional study is suggested to measure the impact of student-to-counselor ratios, the extent of implementation of ASCA National Standards, implementation patterns, and internal school issues that affect implementation. The findings should be useful in describing where more resources are needed.

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